

# **Reinforcing Organizational Defensive Routines: An Unintended Human Resources Activity**

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*Although human resources professionals are against the proliferation of defensive routines, they often design programs that reinforce them. This paper examines one organization in depth in order to illustrate how its human resources professionals acted in ways that unintentionally reinforced the very defensive routines that they were trying to reduce. Organizational defensive routines organized into self-reinforcing loops can result in lack of effective line leadership and increasing difficulty for management development, organizational development, education, organizational diagnosis, and compensation to achieve their objectives.*

I begin with what I believe are several obvious points. Human resources, like all other managerial functions, will have to continually prove its worth and credibility. Two fundamental criteria that will always be used to assess credibility are first, how well do human resources activities achieve their stated objectives. Second, what is the relationship of this achievement to the financial viability of the organization. There is a third fundamental criterion used periodically, namely how well can human resources professionals reduce their activities to deal with those times when financial resources within the organization are scarce.

The second obvious point is that most organizations develop defensive routines in order to protect themselves from threat. Defensive routines are any policies or actions that prevent the organization from experiencing pain or threat *and* simultaneously prevent learning how to correct the causes of the threat in the first place. Organizational defensive routines are pro overprotection and anti learning.

Defensive routines act to inhibit the effective implementation of any managerial function be it finance, marketing, manufacturing, or human resources. The credibility of human resources policies and practice is especially vulnerable to defensive routines because human

resources personnel often make it part of their stewardship to reduce if not eliminate defensive routines.

### **How Human Resources Professionals and Programs Reinforce Defensive Routines**

The thesis of this paper is that although human resources professionals are against the proliferation of defensive routines, they often design programs that reinforce them. Moreover, their action to reinforce defensive routines is so automatic that they are not aware of what they are doing until after they have done it.

Line management, on the other hand, are often aware of these inconsistencies. They react, at best, with benign distancing and ambivalence. On the one hand, although they may dislike defensive routines, they often use them. On the other hand, they do see the corrosive power of defensive routines. They wish that the human resources professionals could reduce them but doubt that they know how to do so. The end result is that the line executives may condemn human resources personnel for not reducing defensive routines or they may accept their inability to do so as a sign of the primitiveness of the function. They become patient and respectful of the "weakness" in human resources. They also become cautious in supporting the programs financially.

I believe that as these reactions on the part of the line accumulate over time, the long-range credibility of those human resources activities that are not legally mandated and that are intended to deal with defensive routines (such as management development, organizational development, training and organizational diagnoses) will, at best, be tolerated, and at worse, will be reduced drastically. The latter will usually occur during financial belt-tightening so that it is not seen as an attack on human resources.

Recently I have had the opportunity to watch several organizations where top management decided to get tough on costs either because they had concluded that their organizations were fat and happy or that they were in a period of financial difficulties. I saw how the human resources professionals acted in ways that unintentionally reinforced the very defensive routines that they were trying to reduce. I should like to illustrate by examining one of these firms in some depth. I have selected the one that I believe has had, and continues to have, a strong commitment to people. But before I do so, a word about defensive routines.

### **Defensive Routines: Mixed Messages**

One of the most frequent defensive routines that we have observed is mixed messages. In large decentralized organizations, for

example, there is the tension between what control corporate deems necessary if it is to fulfill its stewardship and the autonomy the divisional heads believe should exist if decentralization is to be credible.

Divisional heads describe the mixed messages that they received as:

“You are running the show, however . . .”

“You make the decisions, but clear with . . .”

“That’s an interesting idea, but be careful . . .”

### **The Logic Embedded in the Mixed Messages**

Mixed messages contain meanings that are simultaneously:

ambiguous	and	clearly so
imprecise	and	precisely so

Anyone who deals with mixed messages experiences the dilemmas that are embedded in them. The designers know that designing a message to be clearly ambiguous requires skill and knowledge about the receiver. They know that to be vague and to be clear is inconsistent. Furthermore to be clearly vague is not only inconsistent but it is designed inconsistency. To design inconsistency makes the designer vulnerable unless the receiver does not question the inconsistency.

One way to increase the likelihood that the receiver will not focus on the inconsistency is for the sender to act as if there isn’t any. This will work if the receiver is willing to sense the act and responds as if it is not an act, namely they do not discuss the inconsistency.

There are therefore four rules about designing and implementing mixed messages. They are:

- 1) Design a message that is inconsistent.
- 2) Act as if the message is not inconsistent.
- 3) Make the inconsistency in the message and the act so that there is no inconsistency undiscussable.
- 4) Make the undiscussability of the undiscussable also undiscussable.

When people abide by the rules, it is possible to understand and predict their actions. Note, I said people, not certain people. The beauty about rules is that when followed, they are all you need to explain the behavior. The analysis above holds for young or old, superior or subordinate, rich or poor, male or female, and minorities of any kind. So do the organizational consequences that follow (Argyris, 1982, 1985).

## **The Rules to Manage Threats Make Defensive Routines Unmanageable**

It is not possible, to my knowledge, to deal effectively with any subject if it is not discussable and if its undiscussability is undiscussable. Under these rules, individuals with a high sense of integrity and willingness to accept personal responsibility will feel a double bind.

If they do not discuss the defensive routines, they will continue to proliferate.

If they do discuss them, they (the individuals) may get in trouble.

One colorful senior executive told me that in their organization they called these double binds "shit sandwiches."

The result is that defensive routines are protected and reinforced by the very people who prefer that they do not exist. But since the protection is covert and undiscussable, the defensive routines appear to the others as self-protective and self-reinforcing.

### **Weak Line Manager Leadership**

An organization with 10,000 employees at all levels considered to be one of the most forward looking in human resources, conducted an employee survey (administered by an outside consulting firm). Ninety-five percent of all the employees responded. One of the most prominent findings was that the majority of the employees considered line management to be "weak." The statistical data were given to several small groups to analyze in depth and to provide explanations. These groups worked for several days on their respective tasks. At the end, there was a high agreement among the groups that line managers (at all levels): (1) were indecisive, (2) did not wish to take risks, (3) were especially afraid to take action that might hurt them politically, and (4) bypassed the difficult problems on the grounds that if ignored they would go away.

There are three themes of this diagnosis that I should like to make explicit.

1) All the characteristics attributed to the line managers were inconsistent with the policies and espoused theories of the company about effective leadership. There was a mismatch, therefore, between what management valued and taught and how managers behaved. In this sense the managers' behaviors were errors.

2) The errors were routinized. This means that they were part of the everyday behavior repertoire of the line managers and they were sanctioned by the culture of the organization. In short, line managers

behaved inconsistently with company policies, the inconsistencies became part of the fabric of the organization, and they were not discussable.

3) The managers were not open to discussing their indecisiveness, fears, and self-protection. Doing so could be a cure that would make their illness worse.

The small groups also developed causal explanations for these leadership actions. For example:

Management does not make decisions	because	They do not know if it is their job to do so.
Management is insecure	because	They fear making a final decision because, if it were wrong, they would be hurt politically.
Management has blinders on	because	They believe that difficult problems will go away if ignored.

Combining the logic embedded in these causal statements and in the diagnosis above, we conclude that line managers act ineffectively, out of ignorance and fear. They protect themselves by making their actions and the causes of the actions undiscussable and by distancing themselves from feeling responsible.

We are now beginning to develop a self-maintaining pattern. We begin with line managers being indecisive, risk avoiders, etc. We then add ignorance and fear that leads the managers to make these issues undiscussable and to distance themselves from feeling responsible. The distancing and undiscussability make it likely that nothing will change. Hence the managers will continue to act indecisively, avoid risk, and play politics. The loop is closed and the pattern becomes self-maintaining; it becomes a defensive loop.

A leadership training program was developed by human resources personnel for line managers to deal with the issues the employees raised. The logic embedded in the parts of the program designed to deal with these issues included:

If line managers do not know it is their job to make decisions	then	Design learning experiences to make it clear that top management expects them to make decisions. Top management will support initiative taking by the line managers.
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If line management is concerned about being hurt politically	then	Design learning experiences to make it clear that the top does not want political issues to drive line's actions. Performance and excellence should drive their actions.
If management believes that difficult problems will go away if ignored	then	Design learning experiences that make it clear that top management believes that difficult problems should be surfaced and engaged; not bypassed.

A basic assumption embedded in this training program is that self-maintaining defensive patterns or loops can be interrupted by making clear top management (1) supports decisive action and risk taking, (2) does not support politicking, and (3) supports engaging defensive routines, not bypassing them.

The problem with this assumption can be illustrated by pointing out that top management believed that they had made these views clear. One senior line executive asked during the session when the plan was up for approval, "Why do we even have to make it clear that we are for decisiveness, for risk taking, and against politicking. Don't they know that?"

A senior human resource official responded, "I think messages like these have to be repeated and repeated so that they are reinforced." "I guess you are correct," responded the line executive, "I'm glad we're getting on top of this."

But what are they getting on top of?

If the line executive is correct, then they have been communicating the messages that the training program is to communicate. If the messages did not communicate before why would they communicate now? Because, if the human resources executive is correct, line managers forget them. How does he know that this is the cause?

A different explanation could be that line managers have not forgotten the messages. The problem was that the messages were not credible. One reason that they were not credible was that the top management acted indecisively, played politics, and were risk averse. A second reason was that a set of defensive routines existed in the culture to make these issues undiscussable and therefore not to engage them. Hence another self-maintaining defensive loop.

If this is true, the training program is likely to repeat and reinforce the very conditions that helped to create the problems that it is designed to reduce. For example, whenever the line managers hear

top executives espouse decisiveness, risk taking, and engagement of defensive routines, they discount these pleas and behave in the opposite manner and try to hide that this is the case. Whenever top line executives espouse these values, they unrealistically create a process where credibility of what they espouse is reduced and the managers' predisposition to hide this fact is increased. These processes of discounting, reduction of credibility, and bypassing will be activated during the training program.

There is a second basic assumption of the training program that should also be questioned. The training program assumes that managers require skill training in being decisive, taking risks, etc. I have just suggested a reason why this may not be the case. But let us assume that it is true because in an organizational culture that does not support these abilities and skills, it is reasonable to assume that the line managers may not have them. The flaw in the training program, as it is presently designed, is that it does not deal with the skills that line managers do have. They are skillful at being indecisive, avoiding risks, and bypassing threat. Moreover, they are also skilled at covering up their skills, even to themselves.

Finally, if the line managers have been acting this way for years then their sense of confidence and esteem is intimately tied up with these "negative" actions. Asking line managers to change behavior that they have learned to use in order to survive can lead them to feel embarrassed, bewildered, frustrated, and angry (Argyris, 1982). The human resources professionals did not plan for dealing with such feelings. The training program bypassed these feelings partially because, as we shall see below, the human resources professionals automatically bypass such feelings whenever they occur.

The point that I am making is that the program assumes that ignorance, fear, and distancing exist because individuals either are forced to have these feelings or don't know any better. The former requires that top management support explicitly decisiveness and taking risks. The latter requires that new leadership skills be taught.

The dilemma arises because it may be the actions of the top management plus the norms of the organizational culture designed to protect the top (as well as the managers) that coerce the line managers to act as they do. If this is true, then the program, as presently designed, will not correct the problem.

What is likely to occur is that line managers will attend the training sessions and feel anything from bewilderment to anger when they hear messages consistent with "make decisions," "don't rely on politics," and "surface difficult problems." They will feel that they know how to make decisions, not to pay attention to politics, and to surface difficult issues. The problem, from their point of view, is that such actions do not make sense if they are to get their job done. There is validity to their views.

The program as designed ignores these issues. When we asked the human resources professionals why so, there were two replies. First, a training program to deal with these issues would take much more time than line management is willing to allow. Second, they did not know of any program that would get at these issues without getting into "organizational therapy," a thrust which would not be approved by the top. They had some disappointing experience with such organizational development activities during the past decade.

Both of these replies are valid and both are self-sealing. Examining the OD programs in this firm during the late sixties and early seventies would lead me to agree with the line executives. The programs had the puzzling quality of being anti-organizational defensiveness yet producing new defenses and strengthening old ones.

It is understandable that top line executives would not approve lengthy organizational change programs. Thus we have a situation where a training program has been designed and approved that is not "organizational therapy." But whatever it is, it reinforces the very organizational defenses that they wish to reduce.

It is interesting to note that when employees were told that action was being taken to deal with their diagnoses, many of them expressed doubts. The human resource professionals compiled these doubts. They included:

Will managers really be willing to take the risks required?

If line managers do not do one performance evaluation session well, why do we think that they will do four?

The new ideas are fine, but the managers will not do one.

They are the same people—why will they behave differently?

Managers won't (change) if their bosses will not.

Embedded in these concerns are two assumptions, namely that managers will not change and that they are uninfluenceable. These assumptions are the opposite of those that are embedded in the leadership training program, namely that the managers will change and they are influenceable.

If our analysis is correct, it is unlikely that the line managers will change as a result of the leadership program because it bypasses the causes of the problems identified by the organizational diagnosis. This consequence could lead the employees to conclude that their assumptions were correct. Unfortunately, what they may not realize is that their conclusion is only partially correct and is the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We are now ready to construct the first of three defensive loops that are related to how the organization deals with threat and its causes.



## **Defensive Loop I: Bypassing Threat and the Causes of Threat**

Line executives are seen by employees as indecisive, fearful, and distancing



Line managers act in these ways because they believe that in the organization, it is necessary to do so in order to get a job done and in order to survive.



A leadership training program is created to assure the line managers that they have the power to make decisions, they need not be political, and they can be taught the skills that will help them engage and not bypass threatening problems.



The leadership program itself is a bypass of the organizational causes of these problems, such as the top executives act in ways to encourage indecisiveness, politicking, and bypassing. The cultural norms also support these actions.



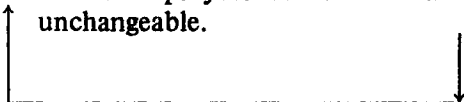
The line managers who attend the programs will feel, at best, that they are attending leadership courses that teach them useful skills such as listening, encouraging participation. However, they will also believe that the course does not deal with the causes of their learning to be skillful at using ignorance, politics, and distancing.



The line managers may learn new skills but they will not use them as long as the situation in which they operate is not changed.



The employees will see the line managers as uninfluenceable and unchangeable.



Ironically, this defensive loop is not news to employees at all levels. When we present it, they recognize it (in varying degrees) as real, powerful, self-reinforcing, and extremely difficult to change. These beliefs, in turn, act to reinforce the loop as well as the leadership problems with which we began.

## Defensive Loop II: The Automatic Reactions of Human Resources Professionals to the Defensive Loop

How do human resources professionals deal with this defensive loop and the routines within it? Judging from the leadership program that they designed, they bypass the threatening issues. In doing so, they do not act differently than do most of the line executives. However, the human resources professionals have made it part of their stewardship to reduce defensive routines in organizations. The success of many of the educational programs that they are selling to top management about managing people and excellence depends on reducing the defensive routines.

For example, about the same time that the organizational diagnosis was carried out, the human resources professionals had devised a new compensation program that was warmly approved by the top management.

The human resources professionals concluded that the biggest problems they would have in implementing the new program were behavioral ones. The new compensation program required that the superiors create settings in which they encouraged subordinates to ask for help, to discuss their fears, to express differences, etc., as well as superiors who took initiatives and did not hide behind organizational defensive routines, whether they were political or not. But these are the very skills that the organizational diagnosis cited above suggested the superiors lacked. Moreover, if the managers act in ways to inhibit open communication of differences, etc., they are probably doing it unawaringly. Individuals do not normally go into a situation with a plan to act in ways that are counterproductive. If they are acting counterproductively and not being stopped, then there must exist some kinds of norms in the organizational culture to support such behavior including norms not to confront it.

I inquired about this logic with two senior human resources professionals:

*Chris:*

I should like to ask:

If the line managers lack the required skills, and if they have skills that are counterproductive to achieving the conditions required by the new program, what led you to exclude this point in your presentation to the top management when you asked for approval?

(silence)

*P (Professional)<sub>1</sub>:* (smiles) I do not have a good answer for that. I guess our present emphasis was more on the task (of figuring out the numbers) than on the behavior during the session.

(later)

*P<sub>1</sub>*: Okay. Let me explain it this way. When the supervisors are trying to decide what is an appropriate raise, they are using knowledge and rules that are very different from the previous plan. Our objective here is to teach them the rules related to the technical requirements. This part of the exercise is less interactive (of course, the interactive phase is very important).

*Chris*: If I understand, you believe that a manager has to have two sets of skills. One set is related to how he thinks about and arrives at the correct numbers. These skills are minimally interactive. The second set of skills is more interactive: it deals with the entire dialogue.

*P<sub>1</sub>*: Yes.

(later)

*P<sub>1</sub>*: (Returning to your question), we had planned that three fourths of the two-day training program that we recommended would be on the interactive behavioral skills. When top management cut it down to one day, we decided that the managers would learn the new compensation scheme and its rules first. We could then develop modules which the divisions could pick up and use to teach the behavioral skills.

*Chris*: May I now ask, what prevented you from saying to top management, "If the organizational diagnosis is correct, it is unlikely that you or the other managers will be able to implement the behavioral aspects of the new compensation program effectively."?

(silence)

*P<sub>1</sub>*: Why I wouldn't want to do that.

(silence—laughs)

*Chris*: What would lead you not to say that?

*P<sub>2</sub>*: You'd get thrown out of the room.

*P<sub>1</sub>*: You'd create an atmosphere where you would have a failure almost as you began.

*P<sub>2</sub>*: I would prefer to have my audience receptive. (Your strategy) would make them antagonistic. With this situation it generally goes down hill in a hurry.

*P*<sub>2</sub>: (cont'd)

The point you make, however, is a good one. We could have the first two slides as they are and then say "This is where we perceive a great difficulty in accomplishing the first two. This is supported by the organizational diagnosis.

(later)

*Chris*:

If I understand your views, you did not include this issue because you knew that in order to teach the skills you knew were required, it would take more time than they were willing to give you. Hence, you decided to get whatever time the top would give you and later build a program that would get at the skills.

*P*<sub>1</sub>:

I think that is very close to our thinking. I believe that the human resources professionals' predictions were probably correct. The top executives would find forthrightness uncomfortable, especially when it is about their limitations. But, as *P*<sub>2</sub> pointed out, they could have made the point less forthrightly; yet they never thought of doing so. This illustrates the fact that the automatic reactions of the human resources professionals was to bypass the defenses that they attributed to management; to play politics in the sense that they withheld their beliefs that the amount of time the line approved for the training was inadequate; and finally to distance themselves from their fears if they told the truth by assuring themselves that the line would become defensive and "things would then deteriorate."

Thus we have a second organizational defensive loop that is nested within the first one. The automatic reactions of the human resources group is to remain within the limits and constraints of the first defensive loop and act as if this is not the case.

We also have some second-order consequences on the credibility of the human resources function with the top line executives. It turned out that some top line executives believed that the behavioral skills were crucial and wondered why the human resources people did not push for the approval of the time they felt was needed. They did not say so, however, because (a) if the human resources professionals did not take the initiative either they had a valid reason for not doing so or (b) they did not have one and were reluctant to say so. To surface either of these issues could open up Pandora's box in a busy top management session.

There were other top line executives who believed that the behavioral skills were not important. They took advantage of the cautiousness of the human resources professionals' strategy during the meetings by approving the short training programs. The end result was that the line executives of both groups attributed weakness to the human resources group. Of course they did not discuss these attributions with the human resources people (although a few discussed it among themselves).

These automatic responses on the part of the human resources professionals were not limited to relationships with top management. The human resources people used the same action strategies with each other. For example, once the behavioral skills program was designed, it was tried out on a group of human resources professionals. They went through an actual session, giving themselves plenty of time to provide an opportunity to reflect on what was happening. According to our observer:

- Several times the "trainees" insisted on discussing issues that the "trainers" had asked them not to discuss during this session. The trainees ignored the trainers' pleas. The trainers did nothing to engage the issue as to what led the trainees to persist as they did. After all, the purpose of this session was to help the trainers.
- The trainers were unable to demonstrate their own expertise to the satisfaction of the trainees in the behavioral skill areas that the training film had focused upon. This was not discussed.
- The behavior of the superiors in the films could be described as high on inquiry and warmth. They did not confront dependent subordinate behavior, they did not test for when goals would be accomplished, they did not encourage the expression of doubts on the part of the subordinates. In other words, the film had built into it features of the defensive loops.
- After viewing the film, several human resources professionals complained that the film did not deal with the fact that the organizational culture did not encourage open disagreement between superior and subordinate, yet that was a key problem. The trainers responded "That's a good point," and the issue was dropped.

Thus we have human resources professionals avoiding the discussion of difficult issues; not being able to produce the skills they espouse; producing a film where the superior in the film also ignored discussing the difficult issues; and finally, when confronted about the way the film was bypassing difficult issues, the human resources people bypassed discussing that issue.

### Defensive Loop III: Reflecting on Their Practice

There is a third defensive loop that is nested within the second and first. Whereas the second deals with how the human resources professionals act with each other, the third deals with how they reflect on their practice.

In this company the human resources professionals were asked to fill out questionnaires and to answer open-ended questions during interviews about the gaps in their practice. They were asked to do so in order to develop courses for their professional development.

As I examined their replies, four features hit me. The first was the high level of abstraction with which they answered the open-ended questions. For example, "I would like more on assertiveness," "confrontation," "negotiating conflict," or "communications." When I asked several to illustrate the kinds of situations in which they have difficulty, they responded, "Dealing with defensive line managers," or "Helping line managers understand the role of personnel." Thus when the abstractions were filled in, it was primarily with the gaps that they had attributed to the line executives.

Second, they did not ask for help on how to deal with their counterproductive automatic reactions described above nor how they might act to reduce the organizational defensive routines rather than unintentionally reinforce them.

Third, they spoke of new learning experiences, primarily in terms of packages or experts that they heard about. For example, some asked to go to a one-week session in such and such. Others focused on "big" names (and some on lesser names) who were doing or saying things that appeared new to them.

Fourth, not one asked for time to reflect on his or her experience in order to identify the ways that they defend themselves; to design a set of educational experiences to overcome these; and to conceptualize the learning into a new and innovative package that might be used by themselves in teaching others and they, in turn, others. They did not appear to me to be reflective on their experience in order to add to the capital stock of knowledge of their respective profession.

### Concluding Comments

Organizational defensive routines organized into self-reinforcing loops can act to create problems such as the lack of effective line leadership. They can also act to coerce the human resources managers to collude to reinforce these conditions. Under these conditions, it will be increasingly difficult for those in such human resources activities as management development, organizational development, education, organizational diagnosis, and compensation to achieve their objectives.

As the credibility of these types of human resources functions is reduced, the line managers who have been supportive may well continue their support but with a greater degree of distancing. Those line managers who have been doubtful to hostile toward these human resources functions may well react drastically and cut their support.

If and when the support of human resources is reduced or even withdrawn, it will be done with the criticism by line management that the human resources professionals have not met their own promises. The criticism will be true. The irony is that it will be true because human resources professionals learned to remain within the organizational defensive loops and the defenses of the top management. The undiscussables win out, silencing those who are officially committed to reducing them.

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